

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE TO STUDY 29 SPECIES OF FRESHWATER FISH IN 21 STATES FOR POSSIBLE CLASSIFICATION AS THREATENED OR ENDANGERED

Blind cavefish, frecklebelly madtom catfish, and rustyside suckers are among 29 species of freshwater fish selected for study to determine if any should be classified as "threatened" or "endangered" species, Director Lynn A. Greenwalt of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

Twenty-one States are being asked to cooperate in this review. Most are in the Southeast. The Fish and Wildlife Service has contacted the Governors for factual information on the fish.

Reviews of this nature are being carried out by the Service's Endangered Species Office as part of an ongoing surveillance of the animal world.

This survey is one of several scheduled for this year. Status reviews of butterflies, crustaceans, and mollusks already have been initiated. Within the next few months status surveys are expected to begin on upwards of a dozen species of wildlife as required by the law.

One of the most unusual fish being studied is the Alabama cavefish whose entire population of probably less than 100 fish lives in a single cave in Alabama. The fish is blind, white, and about two inches long. It was recently discovered in a limestone cave in northwestern Alabama. It is possible that the fish also survives in other nearby underground waters. The fish lost its protective coloration and sight because of living in

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total darkness, and has evolved to a point where it no longer has eyes. The cavefish has compensated for its blindness by developing an unusual sense of touch which enables it to search out food.

Another Alabama resident, the frecklebelly madtom catfish, was present throughout the Alabama River until impoundment and dredging operations destroyed its habitat. It is currently found only in smaller river systems in Alabama. Frecklebellies were last seen at six Alabama River sampling sites in 1966.

In Virginia, the rustyside sucker has disappeared from many streams in recent years and is currently found only in the Blue Ridge and upper Piedmont streams of the Dan River system. Biologists are not certain why the fish have declined, but suspect that the cause may be sedimentation from poor agricultural practices and construction activities in the upper Piedmont.

Many of the other 29 species of fish under study owe their current waning populations to stream channelization, dredging, or impoundment. Under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for reviewing the status of species which may be "threatened" or "endangered." The Service is requesting factual information from the Governors of the following States in which one or more of the species occur: Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Florida, Arkansas, Mississippi, Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. Other interested parties are also requested to submit any factual information which is germane to this review to: Director, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.